

Winery requirements may loosen

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LANCASTER - Los Angeles County might trim some unfruitful branches from its permitting requirements for wineries, a move local vintners say could help them cultivate a wine tourism industry in the Antelope Valley.

A county Department of Regional Planning report released Monday recommends that several changes be made to the county code to make starting and operating wineries easier.

"This is amazing," said Chantel Kilmer, president of the Antelope Valley Winegrowers Association. "These (changes) will make the small vineyard owners be able to fulfill a dream."

After several meetings between his staff and the Antelope Valley Winegrowers Association, county Supervisor Michael D. Antonovich asked the planning department in June to study the requirements and permitting process for wineries.

The recommendations, if approved by the county planning commission, would allow wineries in more zones and on smaller plots of land and would make opening wine-tasting rooms easier for vintners.

Antonovich aide Norm Hickling called the recommendations the result of ongoing talks between the winegrowers and the planning department.

"This is just extraordinary work on both organizations' parts," Hickling said. "It was a partnership between the community and the county, and it allowed us to get feedback from the people who are actually within the industry."

The winegrowers association had a list of complaints, starting with county requirements for the amount of land wineries have to have. The current county

code says wineries must be five acres or larger. The planning department recommends cutting the requirement to two acres.

"It does not take five acres to make wine, especially for the boutique ... wineries," Kilmer said. "Two acres will make plenty of wine and allow (wine makers) to get started and build their businesses."

The planning department has also recommended a much less stringent process for permitting vintners to operate sales and tasting rooms at their vineyards.

To operate such a facility, a vineyard owner currently would have to get a county conditional-use permit, which can cost thousands of dollars. That means many vintners, especially those with small-scale operations, can't sell their wares.

"Given the initial expenses and tight profit margins for small wineries, the costs associated with conditional-use permit reviews and revisions are a significant disincentive for winery investment," according to the report.

"The most restrictive and expansive permitting requirements for wineries are applied when they wish to offer (wine tastings), despite the fact that the competitiveness of a small winery may depend on direct and 'experiential' sales to visiting customers."

As the report notes, a conditional-use permit usually is required to sell alcohol because of the real or perceived problems associated with clusters of bars and liquor stores.

But wineries are a different matter, according to the report, which says wineries can enhance "the economic vitality and scene character of rural areas."

Kilmer said wineries should be held to a different standard than bars because their aims are different.

"Our goal isn't to make people drunk," she said. "It's to give small tastes so people can decide what wine they want to purchase."

The report recommends allowing tasting rooms and on-site wine sales with a minor conditional-use permit, which is much less expensive and much easier to obtain than a full permit. Kilmer said changing the permitting process for wine

tasting rooms would help the Antelope Valley become a wine tourism region, similar - if on a smaller scale - than those in Santa Barbara, Napa and Sonoma counties.

Hickling said the next step will be to write draft winery ordinances and submit them to the county Planning Commission for approval.